

**Opening Statement**  
**Ranking Member Rep. Connie Mack (FL-14)**  
**Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere**  
**House Committee on Foreign Affairs**  
**February 4, 2009**

***“U.S. Policy Toward Latin America in 2009 and Beyond”***

*As prepared for delivery*

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for your kind remarks. We have worked very well together in the past and I am looking forward to working with you this Congress and continuing our strong relationship on this Committee.

Mr. Chairman, we have an enormous task before us. Under your leadership and the leadership of Mr. Burton, this Committee has recognized the gravity of the issues we face in Central and South America. And while I believe the Bush Administration's heart was in the right place, the Administration did not pay enough attention to the significant challenges and changes in Latin America. We each understand that Latin America is vitally important to our country's prosperity and security, and we will be watching with a careful eye for strong leadership for the region from President Obama and Secretary Clinton.

This year alone, several countries in Latin America will vote for a new president. Chile. Uruguay. El Salvador. Panama. Honduras. This year will be a decisive year for the men and women who wake up every day and who want nothing more than freedom, security, and prosperity in their countries. Going forward, it is important that we consider the potential ramifications of these elections and how we can help the people of Latin America.

A little more than 20 years ago, President Ronald Reagan and the United States were very active in encouraging the adoption of democracy and free markets as political and economic models to promote freedom, security, and prosperity throughout Latin America. These ideals helped defeat the insurgencies and the subversive communist influence advanced by the former Soviet Union and Cuba.

However, in the decades that have passed, the United States has witnessed a growing storm that is brewing in Latin America. Freedom is slipping away, and anti-American, leftist leaders continue to amass power and erode democratic institutions.

Several nations and millions of people in Latin America are vulnerable to this alarming loss of freedom. Venezuela, under self-proclaimed communist President Hugo Chavez, is leading the fight against freedom and democracy.

Chavez—together with the likes of Morales in Bolivia, Correa in Ecuador, and Ortega in Nicaragua—are deliberately destroying freedom and free markets. In each of these countries, the rule of law has given way as the freedoms of the many are systematically eliminated by the few.

In Venezuela in particular, President Chavez continues to snuff out dissent and rattle his saber while lining his pockets from the proceeds of high oil prices this past year.

With the recent collapse of oil prices, the Chavez regime is increasingly feeling threatened, and with next week's referendum, he is once again telling the Venezuelan people to make him president for life. This is dangerous for all of us in this hemisphere, especially given his growing ties to Iran, his military and economic alliance with Russia, and his dubious friendship with the Castros in Cuba. This should give us all great pause and concern.

Mr. Chairman, we must do all we can to support our allies in the region and to promote hope and opportunity. Colombia, under the leadership of President Uribe and with our help, has taken great strides in defeating the FARC and disarming the paramilitary groups. Plan Colombia has had a direct impact in bringing down the number of homicides, kidnappings, and bloodshed there. While things are not perfect in Colombia, now is not the time to turn our backs on our friends. It is all the more reason why we must support Plan Colombia and we must work to pass a free trade agreement.

Mexico is facing an immediate crisis battling drug traffickers and we cannot sit by with this threat to an ally of ours. We must continue to support the Merida Initiative. According to Mexico's attorney general, 6,616 people died in drug-trafficking violence in Mexico last year. A high percentage of those killed were themselves criminals, but many law enforcement agents battling organized crime were also murdered. And the carnage continues. Nearly 400 people have been killed so far this year, and a recent report suggests that Mexican gangs have operations in hundreds of U.S. cities.

Finally, I would like to say a few things about Cuba. During President Obama's inauguration speech, he said, "To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history; but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist." While many are celebrating Fidel Castro's departure from the political stage, we can't overlook that his brother Raul was a vicious enforcer in his brother's regime. The Castros have brutally ruled the Cuban people at the tip of a gun for 50 years. While some are going to push for relaxing many of the restrictions that we have placed on Cuba, nothing, I repeat nothing, the Castros have done has unclenched their stranglehold on the hopes and dreams of the Cuban people.

I realize the challenges I have discussed are big. I know that we will have the chance to discuss a number of these today. But make no mistake: we are at a critical juncture. We cannot turn our backs on Latin America. Mr. Chairman, I appreciate your holding this hearing and I look forward to working together on these important issues.